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POETRY: *A Magazine of Verse*

There is sound philosophy in the fantastic conception of the *Crónica Alfonsina*, in the idea that the most perfect union results from a fusion of unlike but complementary natures. We of the North and the men of the South must come bearing our best gifts. Then we shall meet half-way, like the ships in the poem, and both crews shall speak the same language, though each may bear a different figure-head.

Such an understanding can never be the result of mere treaty-making or diplomacy. It must be built on the solid foundation of mutual respect and sympathy. Men of letters can best bring about the consummation of this understanding. Could we find better emblems to place side by side on our new Pan-American escutcheon than those of Chocano's poem—the golden lion of an undaunted purpose and the silver castle of our dreams? *John Pierrepont Rice*

THE HARD AND THE SOFT IN FRENCH POETRY

I apologize for using these metaphorical terms "hard" and "soft" in this essay, but after puzzling over the matter for some time I can see no other way of setting about it. By "hardness" I mean a quality which is in poetry nearly always a virtue—I can think of no case where it is not. By softness I mean an opposite quality which is not always a fault. Anyone who dislikes these textural terms may lay the blame on Théophile Gautier, who certainly suggests them in *Emaux et Camées*; it is his hardness that I had first

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in mind. He exhorts us to cut in hard substance, the shell and the Parian.

We may take it that Gautier achieved hardness in *Emaux et Camées*; his earlier work did in France very much what remained for the men of "the nineties" to accomplish in England. An examination of what Gautier wrote in "the thirties" will show a similar beauty, a similar sort of technique. If the Parnassians were following Gautier they fell short of his merit. Heredia is perhaps the best of them. He tries to make his individual statements more "poetic"; his whole, for all this, becomes frigid. Samain follows him and begins to go "soft," there is just a suggestion of muzziness. Heredia is "hard," but there or thereabouts he ends. It is perhaps that Gautier is intent on being "hard"; is intent on conveying a certain verity of feeling, and he ends by being truly poetic. Heredia wants to be poetic *and* hard; the hardness appears to him as a virtue in the poetic. And one tends to conclude that all attempts to be poetic in some manner or other defeat their own end; whereas an intentness on the quality of the emotion to be conveyed makes for poetry.

Another possible corollary is that the subject matter will very nearly make the poem. Subject matter will, of course, not make the poem; *e. g.*, compare Mangan's *Kathleen ni Houlihan*, with Yeats' *Song that Red Hanrahan made about Ireland*, where the content is almost identical.

On the other hand the man who first decides that certain things are poetry has great advantage over all who follow

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him, and who accede in his opinion. Gautier did decide that certain things were worth making into poems, whereas the Parnassians only acceded in other men's opinions about subject matter, and accepted Gautier's advice to cut, metaphorically, in hard stone, etc.

Gautier is individual and original even in such poems as the *Poem of Woman*, and the *Symphony in White Major*, which seem but variants on old themes. I have found what might be a germ of the *Symphony* in Renaissance Latin, and there is an Elizabethan lyric about *Swan's down ever*. Nevertheless Gautier's way of thinking about these things was at bottom his own.

His originality is not in his form, his hard, close-cut lines and stanzas. Bernard, a poet praised by Voltaire, and at one time Rameau's librettist, wrote French in clear hard little stanzas:

J'ai vu Daphné, Terpsichore légère,
Sur un tapis de rose et de fougère,
S'abandonner à des bonds pleins d'appas,
Voler, languir.

This is not from a stanza but it shows Bernard's perfectly orderly method.

Gautier writing in opposition to, or in rejection of, the swash of Hugo, DeMusset & Co. came undoubtedly as a contrast, but he can scarcely have seemed so "different" to Frenchmen versed in their own earlier poetry as he does to the English reader coming upon him with slight prelude save English.

We have however some hardness in English, and in Lancelotti we have a hardness which is not of necessity "rugged";

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as in "Past ruin'd Ilion Helen lives." Indeed, Gautier might well be the logical successor to Landor, were he not in all probability the logical co-heir with Landor of certain traditions.

Landor is, from poem to poem, extremely uneven. Our feeling of him must in part rest on our admiration of his prose. Lionel Johnson had a certain hardness and smoothness, but was more critic than poet, and not a very great poet. There is definite statement in George Herbert, and likewise in Christina Rossetti, but I do not feel that they have much part in this essay. I do not feel that their quality is really the quality I am seeking here to define.

We have in English a certain gamut of styles: we have the good Chaucerian, almost the only style in English where "softness" is tolerable; we have the good Elizabethan; which is not wholly un-Chaucerian; and the bad, or muzzy, Elizabethan; and the Miltonic, which is a bombastic and rhetorical Elizabethan coming from an attempt to write English with Latin syntax. Its other mark is that the rich words have gone: *i. e.*, words like *preluciand*, which have a folk tradition and are, in feeling, germane to all Europe: *Leuchend*, *luisant*, *lucente*; these words are absent in Miltonism, and purely pedantic words, like *irriguous*, have succeeded them.

We have Pope, who is really the Elizabethan satiric style, more or less born out of Horace, and a little improved or at least regularized. And we have Landor—that is, Landor at his best. And after that we have "isms" and "eses": the pseudo-Elizabethanism—*i. e.*, bad Keats; and the romantics, Swinburnese, Browningese, neo-celticism. And how

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the devil a poet writing English manages to find or make a language for poems is a mystery.

It is approximately true, or at least it is a formulation worth talking over: that French prose is good in proportion as it reaches a sort of norm; English prose is good in proportion as a man makes it an individual language, one which he alone uses. This statement must not be swallowed whole. And we must also remember that when Italians were writing excellent and clear prose—in the time of Henry VIII—Englishmen could scarcely make a clear prose formulation even in documents of state and instructions to envoys; so backward were things in this island, so rude in prose the language which had been exquisite in the lyrics of Chaucer.

French "clarity" can be talked to death, and there are various kinds of French prose—the Voltaire-Anatole-France kind, the Stendhal roughness and directness, the Flaubertian art, and also the "soft" prose. Flaubert and Anatole France are both "softer" than Voltaire and Stendhal. Remy de Gourmont is almost the only writer who seems to me good in a French prose which must, I think, be called "soft." It is with him a peculiar and personal medium.

If this seem an over-long prologue, think how little discussion there is of these things. Only a few professors and their favorite students seem to have read enough to be able to consider a matter of style with any data at their disposal—these and a few poets of the better sort; and professors are not paid to spread heresies and bring uncertain-

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ties into accepted opinion; and poets of the worse sort seem seldom to have any reading. So a prologue is needed even for a brief attempt to find out where French verse has got to; or where it had arrived a few years ago, seeing that since the war, *faute de combattants*, no one has had time to go forward, or even to continue the work of 1912-1914—since undigested war is no better for poetry than undigested anything else.

Since Gautier, Corbière has been hard, not with a glaze or parian finish, but hard like weather-bit granite. And Heredia and Samain have been hard decreasingly, giving gradually smoothness for hardness. And Jammes has been "soft," in his earlier poems with a pleasurable softness. And De Regnier seems to verge out of Parnassianism into an undefined sort of poetry. Tailhade is hard in his satire.

Romains, Vildrac, Spire, Arcos, are not hard, any one of them, though Spire can be acid. These men have left the ambitions of Gautier; they have done so deliberately, or at least they have, in the quest of something well worth seeking, made a new kind of French poetry. I first wrote of *Unanimisme* in the *New Age* something over four years ago. Romains is the centre of it. A recent English essay on the subject, trying to point to English *unanimistes*, is pure rubbish, and shows no comprehension on the part of its author. Romains' *unanimisme* is a definite theory, almost a religion. He alone of the better French poets seems to have written at its dictates. The rest of the men of his decade have not written to a theory. Romains has, I think,

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more intellect than the rest of them, and he is an equally notable poet. He has tried to make, and in places succeeded in making, poetry out of crowd-psychology. Vildrac has been personal and humanitarian. Arcos and Spire have delineated. Romain's portrayal of the collective emotions of a school of little girls out for the day is the most original poem in our generation's French. His series of "prayers"—to the God-one, the god-couple, the god-house, the god-street, and so on—is extremely interesting. Vildrac's short narrative poems are a progress on the pseudo-Maupassant story, and have parallels in English. Romain has no English parallel. Allowing for personal difference, I should say that Spire and Arcos write "more or less as I do myself." I do not mean to make any comparison of merits, but this comparison is the easiest or simplest way of telling the general reader "what sort of poems" they have written.

I do not think I have copied their work, and they certainly have not copied mine. We are contemporary and as sonnets of a certain sort were once written on both sides of the channel, so these short poems depicting certain phases of contemporary life are now written on both sides of the channel; with, of course, personal differences.

Vildrac has written *Auberge* and *Visite*, and no doubt these poems will be included in any anthology of the period. The thing that puzzles me in attempting to appreciate both Romain and Vildrac is just this question of "hardness," and a wonder how poetry can get on without it—not by any means demanding that it be ubiquitous. For I

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do not in the least mean that I want their poems rewritten "hard"; any more than I should want Jammes' early poems rewritten "hard." A critic must spend some of his time asking questions—which perhaps no one can answer. It is much more his business to stir up curiosity than to insist on acceptances.

E. P.

BACK TO CHINA

Literary currents in America often remind one of a switch-back road. Somebody over here starts something, but the trail seems to end—get lost in the rocks or the bushes. After months or years, however, it reappears near its source—American papers quote the great news as coming from London.

For example, the *Literary Digest* of December 29th quotes the London *Times* on *What Chinese Poets can Teach Ours*. Of course POETRY from its beginning has emphasized the oriental influence, and nearly three years ago it printed Mr. Pound's translation (from Fenollosa's notes) of *An Exile's Letter*, by Li Po—facts which the *Digest* forgets to mention. Also POETRY from the first has been urging upon occidental poets the qualities for which the *Digest* now praises the Chinese—simplicity, immediacy, unpretentiousness, etc. "The wonder is, why no European poet has ever written thus," it exclaims, and continues, quoting from the *Times*:

The difference seems to be that the Chinese poet hardly knows he is one. "The great poets of Europe, in their themes and their language, insist that they are poets—" what they do is accompanied